Pachomius the Great

(c. 292 – 9 May 348)

BRIEFING

Pachomius (/pəˈkoʊmiəs/; Greek: Παχώμιος *Pakhomios*; Coptic: Ⲡⲁϩⲱⲙ; c. 292 – 9 May 348 AD), also known as Saint Pachomius the Great, is generally recognized as the founder of Christian cenobitic monasticism. Coptic churches celebrate his feast day on 9 May, and Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches mark his feast on 15 May or 28 May. In Lutheranism, he is remembered as a renewer of the church, along with his contemporary (and fellow desert saint), Anthony of Egypt on 17 January.

NAME

The name *Pachomius* is of Coptic origin: ⲡⲁϩⲱⲙ *pakhōm* from ⲁϩⲱⲙ *akhōm* "eagle or falcon" (ⲡ *p-* at the beginning is the Coptic definite article), from Middle Egyptian ḥm "falcon", originally "divine image". Into Greek, it was adopted as Παχούμιος and Παχώμιος. By Greek folk etymology, it was sometimes interpreted as "broad-shouldered" from παχύς "thick, large" and ὦμος "shoulder".

LIFE

Pachomius was born in c. 292 in Thebaid (near modern-day Luxor, Egypt) to pagan parents. According to his hagiography, at age 21, Pachomius was swept up against his will in a Roman army recruitment drive, a common occurrence during this period of turmoil and civil war. With several other youths, he was put onto a ship that floated down the Nile and arrived at Thebes in the evening. Here he first encountered local Christians, who customarily brought food and comfort daily to the conscripted troops. This made a lasting impression, and Pachomius vowed to investigate Christianity further when he got out. He was able to leave the army without ever having to fight. He moved to the village of Sheneset (Chenoboskion) in Upper Egypt and was converted and baptized in 314.

Pachomius then came into contact with several well known ascetics and decided to pursue that path under the guidance of the hermit named Palaemon (317). One of his devotions, popular at the time, was praying with his arms stretched out in the form of a cross. After studying seven years with Palaemon, Pachomius set out to lead the life of a hermit near St. Anthony of Egypt, whose practices he imitated until Pachomius heard a voice in Tabennisi that told him to build a dwelling for the hermits to come to. An earlier ascetic named Macarius had created a number of proto-monasteries called lavra, or cells, where holy men who were physically or mentally unable to achieve the rigors of Anthony's solitary life would live in a community setting. According to the *Bohairic Life of Pachomius* (17), while Pachomius was praying at the deserted village of Tabennisi, he heard a voice calling him, saying, "Pachomius, Pachomius, struggle, dwell in this place and build a monastery; for many will come to you to become monks with you, and they will profit their souls." Later, while praying at night after a day of harvesting reeds with his brother on a small island, Pachomius had another vision of an angel saying to him three times, "Pachomius, Pachomius, the Lord's will is [for you] to minister to the race of men and to unite them to himself" (*Bohairic Life of Pachomius* 22).

Pachomius established his first monastery between 318 and 323 at Tabennisi, Egypt. His elder brother John joined him, and soon more than 100 monks lived nearby. Pachomius set about organizing these cells into a formal organization. Until then, Christian asceticism had been solitary or *eremitic* with male or female monastics living in individual huts or caves and meeting only for occasional worship services. Pachomius created the community or *cenobitic* organization, in which male or female monastics lived together and held their property in common under the leadership of an abbot or abbess. Pachomius realized that some men, acquainted only with the eremitical life, might speedily become disgusted if the distracting cares of the cenobitical life were thrust too abruptly upon them. He therefore allowed them to devote their whole time to spiritual exercises, undertaking all the community's administrative tasks himself. The community hailed Pachomius as "Abba" ("father" in Aramaic), from which "Abbot" derives. The monastery at Tabennisi, though enlarged several times, soon became too small and a second was founded at Pbow. This monastery at Pbow would go on to become the center for monasteries springing up along the Nile in Upper Egypt. Both of these are believed to have initially been abandoned villages, which were then repurposed for Pachomius' vision of his *Koinonia* (network of monasteries). After 336, Pachomius spent most of his time at Pbow. Though Pachomius sometimes acted as lector for nearby shepherds, neither he nor any of his monks became priests. St. Athanasius visited and wished to ordain him in 333, but Pachomius fled from him. Athanasius' visit was probably a result of Pachomius' zealous defence of orthodoxy against Arianism. Basil of Caesarea visited, then took many of Pachomius' ideas, which he adapted and implemented in Caesarea. This ascetic rule, or Ascetica, is still used today by the Eastern Orthodox Church, comparable to that of the Rule of St. Benedict in the West.

PACHOMIAN MONASTERIES

The Pachomian monasteries or the ***Koinonia*** of Upper Egypt were a group of Christian cenobitic monasteries founded by Pachomius the Great during the 4th century A.D. Altogether, by the mid-300s A.D., nine Pachomian monasteries formed a network or federation of monasteries known as the *Koinonia*. All of the nine historical Pachomian monasteries are now defunct.

In 329 A.D., Pachomius founded the *Koinonia* (originally a Greek word from the New Testament meaning 'fellowship'), or network of monasteries, when he established the new monastery of Pbow and moved there from Tabennisi.

From north to south, the nine monasteries of the *Koinonia* were Tse, Tkahšmin, Tsmine, Tbew, Tmoušons, Šeneset, Pbow, Tabennesi, and Phnoum. Tse, Tkahšmin, and Tsmine, formed a cluster near Panopolis in the north, while Tbew, Tmoušons, Šeneset, Pbow, and Tabennesi made up the core nucleus of five monasteries near the modern-day town of Nag Hammadi. Phnoum was located much further to the south, near Latopolis. Pachomius also founded two nunneries in Tabennesi and Pbow.

Each monastery was added to the *Koinonia* (monastic federation) in the following chronological order. Not all monasteries were newly founded or built by Pachomius when they were added to the *koinonia*; some were pre-existing monasteries.

1. *Tabennesi*
2. *Pbow*
3. *Šeneset (or Sheneset)*
4. *Tmoušons (or Thmoushons)*
5. *Tse*
6. *Tkahšmin*
7. *Tbew (or Thbew)*
8. *Tsmine*
9. *Phnoum*

LEADERSHIP

The leadership hierarchy of the *Koinonia* was as follows.

1. Superior of the *Koinonia*, or "father" (*apa* or *abba*)
2. Superior of the individual monastery, or "steward" (*oikonomos*). The vice steward, or steward's assistant, is known as the "second" (*deuteros*).
3. "Housemaster" (*oikiakos*) of an individual house (*oikos*) within each monastery. A housemaster also had had an assistant or "second" (*deuteros*). Each house had around a few dozen monks, while each monastery had a few dozen houses.

Pachomius was the first superior of the *Koinonia*. After Pachomius's death, Petronius became the superior of the *Koinonia* for three months until he also died, and was succeeded by Horsiesius. In 350, Horsiesius was succeeded by Theodorus when Horsiesius resigned. Horsiesius again became the superior of the *Koinonia* when Theodorus died in 368. A timeline of the superiors of the *Koinonia* is given below.

1. *Pachomius (329–9 May 346)*
2. *Petronius (9 May 346–21 July 346)*
3. *Horsiesius (21 July 346–350)*
4. *Theodorus of Tabennese (350–27 April 368)*
5. *Horsiesius (27 April 368–387)*

DEMOGRAPHICS

According to John Cassian, there was a total of 5,000 monks in the Pachomian monasteries. Palladius gave a figure of 3,000 monks during Pachomius's time, and 7,000 monks by the end of the 4th century. Ammon gave a figure of 600 monks at Pbow when he resided there in 352 A.D.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeological excavations of Pachomian monasteries have been conducted at Tabennesi, Pbow, and Sheneset-Chenoboskion.

MANUSCRIPTS

Various manuscripts have been discovered near the locations of Pachomian monasteries, leading scholars to propose that they were likely part of Pachomian monastic libraries. Tbew, Tmoušons, Šeneset, Pbow, and Tabennesi are all located within a day's walk of each other, and so the texts were likely to have been borrowed and exchanged among the different monasteries.

- Nag Hammadi library
- Dishna Papers
- Barcelona Papyrus
- *The Vision of Dorotheus*